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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: UNHCR CONCERNED ABOUT REFUGEE SITUATION AT
VENEZUELAN BORDER

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Downes for reasons 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Over the last few years, the expansion and intensification of Colombia's conflict has forced an increasing number of Colombians to flee their homes in search of protection in neighboring countries. In Venezuela, officials estimate there are currently two to three million Colombian migrants, including those fleeing from violence, living in more than 150 communities along the Venezuelan border. In 2003, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) created the National Refugee Commission (NRC) to oversee all government efforts to provide protection and assistance to refugees. Since its inception, the Commission received 6,139 asylum requests; 300 hundred requests were granted, 1,000 denied and the remaining await a decision. Between 2004 and 2005, "Mision Identidad" reportedly naturalized roughly 300,000 migrants residing in Venezuela for at least five years. Although the initiative did not discriminate against refugees and asylum-seekers, it did target undocumented, economic migrants in urban areas. UNHCR installed and managed a digitized refugee registration system at the border during 2004 to issue temporary refugee documents on behalf of the government. End Summary.

BORDER SITUATION PROMPTS BRV RESPONSE

¶2. (U) The BRV created the National Refugee Commission (NRC) in 2003 to oversee all government efforts to provide protection and assistance to refugees. The Commission consists of representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, and the Interior and Justice as well as the Office of the Ombudsman, all of which are tasked with the

responsibility of reviewing and granting asylum requests. Since its inception, the Commission has received 6,139 asylum petitions. From those requests, 300 refugees were officially recognized, 1,000 were denied, and the remaining are awaiting review. Asylum-seekers whose petitions had been denied received 15 days to appeal the decision before the Commission. If no favorable outcome was reached, asylum-seekers then appealed the NRC's decision before the Venezuelan Supreme Court and as a last resort, the International Tribunal at the Hague. (Note: NRC claims no request for an appeal has come before the Supreme Court since its inception in 2003.) Although asylum-seekers in Venezuela come from a wide range of countries, including Sierre Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, approximately 85 percent of all requests are from Colombians. NRC Director Ricardo Rincon estimated that over the past 20 years roughly two to three million Colombian migrants, including those fleeing from violence, have resettled in Venezuela.

ASYLUM REQUESTS OUT-PACING NRC'S CAPACITY

13. (C) As is reflected in the small number of recognized refugees since 2003, there is an urgent need to address the NRC's inadequate operational capacity. Virginia Trimarco, former regional representative at the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Caracas, said September 2005 that the NRC's refugee process, although improving, was slow and unable to meet growing demand. During 2004, in response to the Commission's continuing administrative delays, UNHCR Caracas installed and managed a digitized refugee registration system at the border and issued temporary

refugee documentation on the government's behalf. UNHCR claimed that even with official documentation, many registered refugees found it difficult to maintain employment. In the border region, refugees also found it difficult to move freely throughout the country, since temporary documents were not considered substitutes for the Venezuelan cedula identification card at military checkpoints or by potential employers, according to Trimarco. The NRC's Director Dr. Ricardo Rincon told poloff January 9 that the Commission would hence forth manage the registration process, and official documentation will be issued by the National Office of Identification and Naturalization (ONIDEX).

14. (C) In 2004, the BRV created "Mision Identidad" to facilitate the naturalization and regularization of undocumented migrants in the country. Between 2004 and 2005, "Mision Identidad" naturalized roughly 300,000 migrants who had resided in Venezuela for at least five years (septel). Although designed to regularize economic migrants, "Mision Identidad" also served refugees and asylum-seekers, according to Rincon. UNHCR questioned the effectiveness of "Mision Identidad" since it specifically targeted economic migrants and was executed in urban centers rather than border communities. Separately, Embassy Bogota estimated roughly 80 percent of all persons naturalized through "Mision Identidad" were Colombian migrants, including those fleeing from violence. Both UNHCR and the NRC agree it is extremely difficult to determine the extent of the humanitarian crisis at the Venezuelan border. Rincon explained that most Colombian migrants have an established family network in Venezuela, which makes them less likely to file for refugee status.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OVERSHADOWED BY BRV SECURITY CONCERNS

15. (C) UNHCR's Trimarco said September 2005 that kidnappings and assassinations in San Cristobal (located in the border state of Tachira) reportedly linked to Colombian paramilitary and guerrilla groups are on the rise. Venezuelan ranchers in the border region allege they have been forced to hire Colombian paramilitary groups as protection against FARC guerrilla operating in the area. Rincon commented January 9

that illegal transactions (reportedly drug trafficking, gasoline smuggling, and people trafficking) were common practices at border crossings. He added that increased security measures in the border region were not designed to deter victims but to deter criminal activities. UNHCR expressed concern that the BRV's security policies in the area may serve to weaken established refugee protection regimes, resulting in greater migration from border communities to urban centers. Refugee movements to cities, or border communities, bring numerous problems, including xenophobia and unemployment. Colombia refugees, often stigmatized as criminals, drug traffickers or members of irregular armed groups, also find it difficult to secure housing in urban areas without legal documentation.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) BRV officials maintain they have created a comprehensive refugee contingency plan to manage what UNHCR and some NGOs call a humanitarian crisis at the border. We are doubtful the BRV will deploy sufficient resources to ensure the protection and well-being of asylum-seekers and refugees. There seems to be a lack of political will by the government to resolve complex border issues, made more challenging by official indifference over illicit and

guerrilla activity. We also note the rapid naturalization of economic migrants serves the political purpose of new voters for President Hugo Chavez, regardless of any impact it might have on legitimate processes to document refugees.
BROWNFIELD